

## CF 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018 Psalm 73 The Prosperity of the Wicked

At this time of year, kids all over are trying desperately to behave better. They are trying to be more polite, keep their rooms clean, do their chores and complete their homework. But why? What has happened to improve all of this behaviour?

Well, of course Christmas is coming, and these kids have been told that if you're good, then you will get on the nice list and you'll get lots of great presents. But if you are bad, then you'll end up on the naughty list and get a lump of coal or something!

Christmas for many kids is when good kids get rewarded, and bad kids suffer the consequences of their poor choices!

But it is not just kids who believe that this is how the world should work. There are even some Christians who claim that this is how God works in this world. Get your life in order, follow God's will for your life, tithe your money faithfully, keep trusting in the Lord – and he will make sure that good things come your way, like healthy bodies, healthy relationships and a healthy bank balance.

But is this how our world really works? Is this what we see all around us? Do we live in a world where good people are blessed and bad people suffer? Well the author of Psalm 73 didn't think so – and it shook the foundation of his faith, until he saw things from God's perspective. Psalm 73:

“Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.

<sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
I had nearly lost my foothold.

<sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

<sup>4</sup> They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.

<sup>5</sup> They are free from the burdens common to man;  
they are not plagued by human ills.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.

<sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.

<sup>8</sup> They scoff, and speak with malice;  
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.

<sup>9</sup> Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.

<sup>11</sup> They say, “How can God know?  
Does the Most High have knowledge?”

<sup>12</sup> This is what the wicked are like—  
always carefree, they increase in wealth.

<sup>13</sup> Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;  
in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

<sup>14</sup> All day long I have been plagued;  
I have been punished every morning.

<sup>15</sup> If I had said, “I will speak thus,”  
I would have betrayed your children.

<sup>16</sup> When I tried to understand all this,  
it was oppressive to me

<sup>17</sup> till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.

<sup>18</sup> Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.

<sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!

<sup>20</sup> As a dream when one awakes,

so when you arise, O Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.  
<sup>21</sup> When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
<sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.  
<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterwards you will take me into glory.  
<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.  
<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion for ever.  
<sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
<sup>28</sup> But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.”

### 1. What Asaph Knew

The writer of this psalm was Asaph. He was a Levite musician, appointed by David to serve in the tabernacle. Today, we would probably call him a worship leader. So Asaph knew the truth about God, as he declared at the start of this psalm: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” Psalm 73:1

Asaph knew that God is good, that he is holy and just and gracious and loving. And so he believed that those who belong to God, those who are pure in heart, who follow God’s ways, and trust in his power, and serve his kingdom – they will be blessed by him.

#### a) God Is Good

And this matches with what we’ve already seen in the psalms. For example, do you remember that in Psalm 24, David asked who can ascend the hill of the Lord, who can approach the presence of the Lord? In that psalm, David answered his own question by saying:

“He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to an idol  
or swear by what is false.

<sup>5</sup> He will receive blessing from the Lord  
and vindication from God his Saviour.” Psalm 24:4-5

And Jesus agreed. In his beatitudes, he said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Matthew 5:8 So Asaph, got this right. God is good to his people. He does bless those who are committed to him. If we put our faith and trust in Jesus, then we are blessed.

### 2. What Asaph Saw

But the problem was, when Asaph looked around in his day, he couldn’t see this – and it nearly caused him to lose his faith.

#### a) The Prosperity of the Wicked

“But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
I had nearly lost my foothold.

<sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” Psalm 73:2-3

He knew that God was good to his people. He believed that God blessed those who trusted in him. But when he looked around, he didn’t see the righteous being blessed. Instead all he saw was the wicked prospering.

#### i) Their Evil Life

And in the next section of his psalm, Asaph described some of their evil attitudes and behaviour.

So they are arrogant and proud: **“Pride is their necklace.”** Psalm 73:6

They are aggressive and cruel in their treatment of others:

**“They clothe themselves with violence.”** Psalm 73:6

They are always imagining and doing things that are against God’s ways:

**“From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.”** Psalm 73:7

And their mouths are full of hatred, ridicule and domination of others:

**“They scoff, and speak with malice;  
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.”** Psalm 73:8

And they are filled with so much selfishness and their own sense of self-importance that they claim the right to own everything in this universe:

**“Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.”** Psalm 73:9

And they think that they will get away with all of this, because God doesn’t see or know what they do:

**“They say, “How can God know?  
Does the Most High have knowledge?”** Psalm 73:11

### ii) Their Easy Life

And yet, despite all these evil things that they think, say and do, the wicked look like they have it really easy.

They don’t seem to have the same difficulty with illness and weakness that others do:

**“They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.”** Psalm 73:4

They don’t have the same loads to carry or the same level of work to do, or suffering to bear:

**“They are free from the burdens common to man;  
they are not plagued by human ills.”** Psalm 73:5

They seem to be always popular, surrounded by friends enjoying their plentiful supply:

**“Their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.”** Psalm 73:10

And they so they seem to have it easy, a life free of problems, and full of prosperity:

**“This is what the wicked are like—  
always carefree, they increase in wealth.”** Psalm 73:12

And I think it wouldn’t take too much effort to see people around like that today. Whether we think of:

- the dictators who live in a palace while their people starve on the streets,
- the criminals who get rich despite causing hardship to others,
- or celebrities who live in luxury paid for through their immoral lifestyles,
- or maybe even a work colleague who get promoted because they’re willing to do whatever the boss asks,
- or our neighbours, friends and family who seem to live an easy life despite having no faith in Christ.

And we could go on and on. Like Asaph, we can all see wicked people prosper in this world.

### b) The Suffering of the Righteous

And to make matters worse, Asaph, like many of God’s people, was suffering.

**“All day long I have been plagued;  
I have been punished every morning.”** Psalm 73:14

We don’t know what was going on with Asaph. Maybe he was suffering an illness or a chronic affliction. Whatever it was, he felt like he was being punished for something, even although he was seeking to live faithfully for God.

And again, this matches with what we see. All over this world, God’s people are suffering – in illness and disease, in

persecution and oppression, in poverty and deprivation. And their faithfulness to the Lord does not prevent the suffering they experience.

Last week, I listened to a podcast about the remarkable life of a woman called Helen Roseveare. She served in the Congo as a medical missionary for 20 years. She accomplished amazing things, establishing hospital training centres and sharing the message of Jesus. And then in her latter years she continued to serve the Lord through writing books and preaching all over the world.

But her life was far from easy. She longed to be married, but gave up that chance in order to follow God's call on her life. She experienced numerous bouts of illness. She struggled with depression and doubts. And during the civil war in 1964 she was imprisoned by rebel soldiers, viciously beaten and raped twice.

After her release she returned to her mission work in the Congo, but this time was full of disappointment and turmoil as she was mistrusted and accused by the people she was trying to serve. Eventually she left Africa feeling defeated.

Later when on a speaking tour she heard that her mother whom she looked after had died. A little later, while still on that tour, she was diagnosed with breast cancer!

We need to face up to the reality, that God's people suffer in this world. As Paul and Barnabas said to the early Christians, ["We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."](#) Acts 14:22

### 3. What Asaph Did

So here was Asaph's problem. He knew that God is good to his people, and yet, from everything he saw it looked like the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer in this world. And so he began to question whether following God was worth it.

It was the challenge between the theory and the practice of faith - between what we know is the truth and what we see all around us. If these two things don't match up, well what do you do with it?

Well, some people try and hide from these problems in the hope that they will just go away. Other people share them with everybody they can no matter what influence they might have or who's faith they might stumble. But Asaph did neither.

#### a) He Didn't Hide

He didn't hide from his struggles. He was honest and open enough to face up to this issue and voice his complaint. In Psalm 73:13, he said, ["Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence."](#)

#### b) He Didn't Stumble Others

But he didn't voice this to everybody. He knew that because of his role in the community of faith, he could have caused others to stumble. He said,

["If I had said, "I will speak thus,"](#)

[I would have betrayed your children."](#) Psalm 73:15

#### c) He Went To God

And so Asaph didn't keep silent and he also didn't tell everybody. Neither did he just try and work it out himself. Instead, he went to God with his problem:

["When I tried to understand all this,](#)

[it was oppressive to me](#)

[till I entered the sanctuary of God;](#)

[then I understood their final destiny."](#) Psalm 73:16-17

Asaph struggled with all of this until he went to God and saw this issue through God's eyes and from God's perspective. And I think this is a useful model to follow:

- We shouldn't try and hide from our doubts and struggles. If we try and cover them up, they will just fester away and cause more problems.
- Neither should we go around and broadcast them to everybody. If we do this, we might stumble the faith of others.
- Instead, we need to bring them into God's presence and let God deal with them through the revelation of his truth. Peter wrote: ["Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."](#) 1 Peter 5:7

### 4. What Asaph Understood

So what was the new perspective that Asaph got to answer his problem about the prosperity of the wicked?

### a) The Wicked Are Heading for Judgement

Well it was because he realised that he'd been looking at things from a short-term viewpoint. Yes, the wicked seemed to be doing well. Yes, they were living it up in prosperity and ease. But that was not the end of the story.

“Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.

<sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!” Psalm 73:18-19

This is the final destiny of the wicked. In the end everything that they are and have will be destroyed. God's judgement is coming and they will face the full terror of God's wrath.

John described his vision of that great white throne judgement, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Revelation 20:12, 15

From that perspective, we shouldn't be tempted to envy the wicked. Neither should we triumphantly ridicule them. Instead our hearts should break with compassion for them, and we should be motivated to go out with the gospel and plead with them to “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Acts 16:31

### b) The Righteous Are Blessed Forever

So from the perspective of eternity, the wicked have nothing. But in contrast, the righteous have everything.

#### i) A Comforting Presence

The wicked have the popularity of the world, but the righteous have the comforting presence of the Lord.

“Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.” Psalm 73:23

#### ii) A Secure Prospect

The wicked face coming destruction, but the righteous have the secure prospect of being with the Lord forever.

“You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterwards you will take me into glory.” Psalm 73:24

#### iii) An Enduring Provision

The wicked may have bodies that are healthy and strong, but the righteous have the enduring provision of God's help in their lives:

“My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion for ever.” Psalm 73:26

#### iv) A Priceless Possession

And the wicked may have been temporarily rich with the treasures of this world, but the righteous have priceless spiritual possessions, especially the greatest treasure of knowing God! “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.” Psalm 73:25

And this true for each one of us who have trusted in Jesus today. Yes, on the surface, compared to others, we might not look like we have much. We might be going through a time of intense suffering and loss. And yet, the spiritual reality is that God “has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” Ephesians 1:3

Even although we deserve the destiny of the wicked, because of the cross of Jesus, we have this comforting presence, this secure prospect, this enduring provision and this priceless possession.

## 5. What Asaph Concluded

And it is this understanding that can help us to keep going despite the struggles that we face. In this world evil people may indeed prosper and good people may indeed suffer. And yet Asaph could conclude:

“Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

<sup>28</sup> But as for me, it is good to be near God.

I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds." Psalm 73:27-28

Following Jesus can be difficult. It might include ridicule and rejection and persecution. And it doesn't guarantee protection from all the regular suffering of life. From a short-term perspective, we might even question is it worth it?

But from the from eternity's point of view, it's not in doubt. Those who reject Jesus will tragically be lost forever. But for us who have put our faith in Jesus, we have his wonderful presence in our life now and the guarantee of being with him in heaven forever. And so from this perspective, following Jesus is worth it.

As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

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